NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.*

No. 453. *Price, Five Cents.*

THE PEAR-SHAPED DIAMONDS

OR NICK CARTER'S MOST DELICATE TASK

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

But for Nick Carter, the superb record of the Inspector would have clos[illegible] there; as it was, the bullet tore through the shoulder of his coat, grazing the flesh.

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THE PEAR-SHAPED DIAMONDS

OR,

Nick Carter's Most Delicate Task.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

HOW NICK CARTER TOOK THE CASE.

When Nick Carter descended to the breakfast table, somewhat earlier than was his custom, the topmost letter on the pile of them awaiting his attention was as follows:

"The Establishment of Orloff & Co., Merchants in Precious Stones, Jewelers, Madison Square, New York City.

"MR. NICHOLAS CARTER: Will you call upon the president and general manager of our establishment at your earliest convenience after the receipt of this letter? A matter of the utmost importance has arisen which renders it imperative that we consult with you at once.

"Respectfully yours,

"HENRY J. BEAUCHAMP, Secretary."

Nick tossed the letter across the table to his chief assistant, Chick, with the remark:

"What's up now, do you suppose, Chick?"

The assistant read the letter through to the end before he replied, and then returned it to the envelope, after which he remarked:

"I picked up a rumor about it last night, down at headquarters. O'Brien mentioned it to me."

"What was it, Chick?"

"Why, it was something about the mysterious disappearance of three very remarkable diamonds, valued—let me see—valued at something like fifty or seventy-five thousand dollars each."

"Humph!" said Nick.

"I didn't pay much attention, and did not pursue the subject," continued the assistant. "In fact, it only came up incidentally; but he referred to Orloff & Co., so I suppose that is the reason why they have sent you the letter."

"Was that all that O'Brien said about the matter?"

"Yes," was the reply; and, after that, both were silent until the meal was finished.

Then, as the detective was leaving the table, he said to his assistant:

"I am going to Orloff's, Chick. You had better remain in the house, so that I can call you up on the phone, if I should need you."

"Very good. I will be here."

Before leaving his own house this particular morning, the detective resorted to an old custom of his, which he had not employed in a long time, and that was, he repaired to his private study and arrayed himself in a complete disguise.

The rather vague wording of the letter, coupled with the information that Chick had happened to have on the probable subject of it, had convinced the detective that he was on the eve of the prosecution of a case of more than usual importance—and in this thought he did not refer so much to the value of the property stolen as to the conditions under which the gems had been taken.

He was thoroughly posted concerning the precautions with which the great firm of Orloff & Co. surrounded itself in order to avoid the occurrence of just such events as this one might prove to be, and he knew that it could be no ordinary thief who could obtain possession of an item of Orloff's property, let alone get away with it.

It was for this reason, and because of this thought, that he prepared himself for the call he was about to make in rather an unusual manner.

When he did leave the house to undertake the errand he had in hand he was so perfectly disguised that he might have passed inspection before half a dozen expert detectives with the greatest ease and without the least fear of even creating the suspicion that he was disguised at all.

And this, the reader should bear in mind, is the quintessence of the art of disguising one's self. It is not so much to alter the general appearance as it is to conceal the fact that a disguise has been adopted at all.

When the detective did go upon the street, he had the appearance of a foreigner, who had so constantly visited this country that he had become thoroughly Americanized. He looked English—but he also looked German, just a little; and, although his appearance was that of a blonde, there was that in his manner which suggested the Frenchman, too. In a word, he was so thoroughly cosmopolitan in suggestion that he might have belonged to any of the nationalities mentioned.

We will presently discover why he took the trouble to do all this.

When he went out he did not go at once to the establishment of Orloff & Co.; indeed, he started away in quite an opposite direction, and after a little while entered a jewelry store on Fifth Avenue, above Twenty-ninth Street.

Here the obsequious clerks who saw him enter, and who noticed the elegance of his attire, which was in the height of fashion, grouped themselves expectantly for his reception; but he strode down the aisle of the store past them, and made his way directly to the head of the firm, who was well known to him, but who, of course, had no idea of Nick Carter's identity in the disguise he had adopted.

"Good-morning, Dreisher," said the detective, easily and cordially, but in a tone too low for any of the clerks to overhear. He spoke in his natural voice, and he smiled assuringly when he did so.

"What the dev——" began the jeweler; but Nick stopped him, with a deprecatory gesture and another inimitable smile.

"Don't you know me?" he asked.

"Why, confound it! You aren't Carter, are you? It is Carter's voice, but——"

"Exactly. You know me now, don't you?"

"Why, yes, sure! How are you, Nick? And what in the world have you gotten yourself up so like an imported beau for, eh?"

"Oh, I've got a little work on hand which seemed to require it, that's all; and, I say, old chap, I want you to help me."

"Eh? Help you? Help you do what?"

"To carry out the part I am playing."

"I suppose I am dull this morning, but, all the same, I don't understand."

Nick smiled.

"Tell me," he said, with seeming irrelevance, "who and what you thought I was when I entered the store just now, and walked straight back toward you."

"Why, I put you down as—what shall I say? A diamond smuggler? At any rate, I listed you under the head of 'Diamonds for Sale.' I expected that you would pull out half a pint of freshly cut diamonds, which you would offer to me—er—at a discount. It isn't quite complimentary, is it? But that is what I took you for—a chap who had diamonds to sell."

"Good!" said Nick. "I have done well, then, for that is precisely how I wished to appear."

"You have made good, all right, Nick."

"Yes, I think I have, inasmuch as I impressed you with the idea."

"Now, what is it that you want of me, Nick?" asked the jeweler.

"I want you to lend me a handful of unset diamonds to carry in my pockets for a few hours, in order to make good this character. Will you?"

"Certainly I will! Want 'em now?"

"Yes; at once."

"Any specifications about what sort of diamonds you want, Nick?"

"I want the very best you have on hand that you can

spare, and which you do not think you will have an opportunity to dispose of during the next three or four hours, for that is about as long as I will care to keep them."

"I think I have got exactly what you want," said the jeweler, musingly. "The bunch is worth close to a hundred thousand, Nick, but I don't have to ask you to be careful with them, for I know you will."

"Oh, I'll take good care of them, and I will have them back here inside of three or four hours," was the reply.

The jeweler rose, without another word, and entered a big, vaultlike safe, where he kept his gems, and presently he returned and spread open upon a table in his private office package after package of white tissue paper, each of which contained a glittering array of diamonds of all sizes and shapes.

"There you are, Nick," he said. "Will that do for you?"

"Splendidly," replied the detective. "Have you a list of them?"

"Sure. A complete one. I don't suppose you really wish to sell any of them, do you?"

"No; not one."

"All right. Stow them away in your pockets; and—er—get them back to me as soon as it is convenient, for I shall be uneasy about them, and more about you, until they are secure in my safe again."

Nick smiled, thanked his friend, and took his departure.

Thirty minutes later he walked in through the front door of the establishment of Orloff & Co., and proceeded directly to the diamond department.

"I wish to see the gentleman in charge here," he said to the clerk who stepped forward to wait upon him; and to that personage, when he approached, the detective said:

"I have some very beautiful diamonds with me which I wish to offer for sale, sir."

"Are they gems?" asked the man behind the counter.

"Every one of them," replied Nick, with confidence. "They are the pick of a collection."

"Will you show them to me?"

"Certainly, if you are the gentleman who is to pass upon them. I would prefer not to exhibit them, however, in the open store."

"Naturally. I think, perhaps, that you had better see Mr. Beauchamp, or Mr. Storms, our president and general manager."

"As you please," said Nick.

"Be kind enough to step this way, sir," said the man behind the counter, and he conducted the detective to the rear of the store, and so on into the private offices of the firm.

There he offered the detective a chair in an anteroom, while he disappeared behind some glazed doors which communicated with an inner sanctum beyond; but, after a moment, he returned, and motioned to Nick to follow him.

A tall, smooth-faced, handsome man of middle age was seated at a desk, and, when the detective entered, he raised his head and remarked, somewhat curtly:

"I am told that you have some gems to show us, sir. I have very little time at my disposal just now, for I am momentarily expecting a call of considerable importance, but, if you will show me what you have, I will make an appointment to see you later in the day, if it seems warranted to do so."

"Very well, sir," said the detective.

Then, without further ceremony, he placed the diamonds he had borrowed from his friend, one package after another, on the table between him and the president of the company—the man upon whom he had been requested to call—and he smiled as he did so, for he knew that the call to which Mr. Storms had referred was the call he was expected to make.

Nick's friend had not deceived him about the value and purity of the diamonds he had been kind enough to loan, and the president, as well as the man who had brought the detective into the room, was at once interested.

They bent closely over the stones, examining them with the eyes of experts, and presently Mr. Storms remarked:

"These are certainly very excellent stones, sir."

And then, just as Nick had foreseen the president would do, he turned to the man who had introduced the detective into the room, and said:

"Mr. Gordon, I wish you would ask Mr. Krebs to come here a moment. Mr. Krebs," he added, turning to Nick, "is our expert. I would like to have him see the diamonds before I make an appointment with you for the afternoon."

The detective nodded in acquiescence, and Gordon left the room; but the instant he was out of it, and Nick was alone with the president, the detective said, quickly:

"I have no diamonds to sell, Mr. Storms. I borrowed these for the purpose for which I have used them. I am Nick Carter, and I have called in reply to the letter I received from your secretary this morning."

The head of the great firm stared for a moment at the detective; then he broke into a laugh.

"It was well done," he said. "You fooled us from the top down, Mr. Carter."

"Say, rather, from the bottom up, sir."

The jeweler laughed again.

"It was you whom I was expecting to call at any moment when I told you that I would make an appointment with you for the afternoon," said Mr. Storms.

"I was aware of that when you said it. Now, sir, in a moment your Mr. Gordon will return here, accompanied by the man Krebs, for whom you sent him. I do not

care to have either of them made aware of my business here."

"But——"

"Permit me to insist, Mr. Storms. It is really the only condition upon which I will have anything whatever to do with this case. I wish you to be the only person alive aside from myself and possibly one of my assistants, who will know that I am connected with this case at all."

"But it is already generally known that I have asked the secretary to write to you. I do not mean by that that it is known by the clerks; but my associates in the firm are aware of it."

"Very well," said Nick. "In that case—in any case, in fact—I will, when I get home, dispatch a letter to your Mr. Beauchamp, in which I will assure him of the utter impossibility of my taking the case at this time."

"Do you mean, literally, that I am the only person connected with the firm who is to be aware that you are working on the case?"

"I mean it literally."

"But it seems to me, Mr. Carter, that you are taking unnecessary precautions——"

"Mr. Storms, if I should tell you that you were taking some unnecessary precautions concerning the details of your business, you would resent it as an unwarranted assumption on my part, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose I would."

"Very well. You would have a perfect right to do so; and so have I."

"I see the point, and it is well taken. There is only one objection which I now have in mind."

"What is that?"

"Why, if you work for some time on the case, and nothing comes of it—I mean by that, if you do not succeed—how am I to be in a position to pass your bill for services and expenses, if it is not known that you have been on the case? If, in fact, it is generally understood that you have not been on the case at all?"

"If I do not succeed in the work I undertake to do, you will have no bill to pay, either for services or expenses."

"What! Do you mean that?"

"Certainly I mean it."

"And the only condition is——"

"The only condition is that you and I alone know of my connection with the case."

"That's a bargain, Carter!" exclaimed the president, extending his hand.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Storms. Don't go too fast."

"What now?"

"I haven't taken the case yet."

"Oh! I thought you had agreed to do so."

"You forget that I have not heard the particulars; you forget that I know absolutely nothing about the case."

"True."

"You must tell me about it."

"But you will take it, won't you?"

"I expect that I will; but I don't know until after I have heard the particulars."

"You shall hear them at once."

"Again you forget, and this time it is that Gordon and Krebs are now on their way to this office to look at these diamonds."

"That is true. Perhaps you can suggest a way in which we can get rid of them so that we can get down to business, Mr. Carter."

"I think it would be better not to get rid of them."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, go ahead with the examination of the stones. Let your Mr. Krebs make as careful an examination of them as he pleases. Carry out the idea that they are actually for sale. Discuss the matter with them and with me exactly as you would do if you were actually contemplating the purchase. Enter into details about it. Make me an offer, per caret, for the stones. Talk business. I will refuse the offer. I will take the stones away with me and return them to the man from whom I borrowed them. Then, two hours from now, leave your office, on some pretext. Go to the Waldorf. When you get there, ask for Mr. Felix Parsons. You will be taken to my room, for I shall go there from here. How does that strike you?"

"That is all right."

"To-morrow I will send you a letter, signed Felix Parsons, in which I will inform you that I have disposed of the diamonds. That will close the incident."

"All right. That is understood. Here come Gordon and Krebs now."

"Then, in two hours I am to expect you?"

"At the Waldorf, yes."

"We will discuss your matter there. Now, play your part about the diamonds, and play it well, for I am determined that you and I alone shall know of my connection with this affair."

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY OF THE GEMS.

"Well, here I am, Mr. Carter," announced Peyton Storms, president of Orloff & Co., as he entered the room at the Waldorf which Nick Carter had taken in the name of Felix Parsons; "and I wish to say that in all the time I have been associated with the firm of Orloff & Co. this is the first and only occasion when I have willfully deceived them."

"I have not a doubt of it, Mr. Storms," replied Nick, rising to meet him.

"I don't feel just right about it, either."

"Don't you think that the end justifies the means, sir?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure; but it is a new experience for me."

"If we had no new experiences, just think how dull the world would be. I sometimes think that it is the hunger for new experiences which forces cashiers, bookkeepers and confidential clerks to theft."

"I don't understand."

"Their lives are so humdrum, so cast in one mold, so tame, so uneventful, so platitudinous, that the appetite for a new experience becomes unbearable—so they steal."

"Do you believe that ours is a case of that kind?"

"Remember that I have not heard your case as yet."

"Have you heard nothing about it?"

"I have been informed that three pear-shaped diamonds have mysteriously disappeared."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Through the detective bureau. It was told to my assistant."

"We have sought to keep the matter entirely quiet."

"So I conjectured."

"It is a most incomprehensible affair, Carter."

"Most affairs of this sort are."

"We do not understand it at all."

"If you did, there would be no occasion to call for my services."

"True."

"Now, shall we get down to facts?"

"Shall I tell you the story?"

"Yes; I will question you afterward."

"Very good. It happened a week ago to-day."

"So long ago?"

"Yes; as I said, we have taken every precaution not to permit the facts to become known outside the firm."

"But the clerks know about it, do they not?"

"Only a very few of them. Here and there one; that is all."

The detective permitted himself to smile.

"It is more than likely that they all know about it, and have known about it from the very first," he said.

But the jeweler shook his head negatively, unconvinced.

"You are not aware of the system upon which our establishment is operated," he said.

"Possibly not," admitted Nick; "but I am quite familiar with the system upon which the ordinary clerk is made. However, we need not dwell upon that point. Tell me about the diamonds, what they are, and when and how they disappeared."

Peyton Storms settled himself in his chair, and began.

"The diamonds," he said, "are three stones, which came from the African mines. They are of great value, were found at the same time, and were imbedded in the clay very near to each other when they were discovered.

"Later they were found to be flawless, of unusual brilliancy and color—and, in short, my dear sir, they are gems of the very finest quality.

"When the time came to cut them, it was found that they could be worked out in triplet—that is to say that, after they were cut and polished, they would be so exactly alike that only an expert could determine one from either of the others, and so the three were named 'The Triplets.'

"They are shaped like a pear—each of them, of course. They are of extraordinary brilliancy, and they are of great value."

"What, in round figures, are they valued at?" asked the detective.

"The three together are worth, approximately, two hundred thousand dollars."

"So much?"

"Yes; I have told you that they are so much alike that only an expert can determine one of them from either of the others, and yet there is a difference which the expert at once recognizes. For example, one of them is valued at eighty thousand, another at seventy thousand and the remaining one at fifty thousand. In discussing the matter with Inspector O'Brien, I have placed a general valuation of fifty thousand each upon them."

"By the way, before you proceed, it would be well if you were to tell me just what the regular detective force has accomplished in the matter thus far."

"Nothing at all, Mr. Carter, more than to close the avenues of disposal against the thieves."

"You have tried to render the conditions such that the diamonds cannot be sold without your knowledge, eh?"

"Yes; a general alarm and a full description of the stones has been sent to every known market for them in the world."

"But that will not prevent the thieves—if they happen to be lapidaries—from cutting them up into smaller stones, so that they will be rendered unrecognizable, and selling them with ease after that is done."

"Certainly not. We understand that perfectly."

"Please proceed with your account of the affair, Mr. Storms."

"The stones were cut and polished before they came into our hands, but our Mr. Krebs believed that he could greatly improve them, and therefore enhance their value, and so, for a month past, they have been undergoing what we call 'commencement exercises.'"

"Quite an appropriate term, that."

"Yes, I think so. It describes exactly what happens to them. They come out of that last operation finished."

"Well, what more, Mr. Storms?"

"Shall I take the history of one diamond for a day, in our establishment, and describe it to you, so that you will know just what happens to one from the moment when the safe is opened in the morning until it is locked again at night, with the diamond safely deposited inside?"

"No; take the history of these three diamonds, for that particular day when they disappeared. Describe that."

"Very well. It happened a week ago to-day."

"Yes."

"Mr. Compton has charge of the safe where the diamonds were put for safe-keeping, and from which he took them and gave them into the hands of Mr. Krebs that morning."

"Who and what is Mr. Krebs in this establishment?" asked Nick.

"Mr. Krebs is absolutely at the head of our diamond department. He is, in my opinion, the greatest expert in the world. Also, he has been, and still is, in my opinion, the most expert diamond cutter—or grinder—and polisher in the world. He was superintending the 'commencement exercises' of these stones."

"I understand."

"That morning, a week ago to-day, Mr. Compton opened the safe as usual. His assistants—and they are three in number—stood beside him, as they always do when that safe is opened or closed. Nothing is ever taken from that safe or put into it without the presence of four persons, who are jointly and individually responsible for everything that goes into or that comes out of the safe."

"Yes," said Nick.

"There is a system of receipts connected with the delivery of gems from one person to——"

"Please stick to these three diamonds, Mr. Storms."

"Very well. When these three diamonds were delivered to Mr. Krebs, he signed a receipt for them. That receipt is made in quadruplicate; that is to say, there is one original and three carbon copies of that receipt. The original is kept by Mr. Compton and the carbon copies go to his assistants respectively."

"What is the next record in the history of the diamonds for that day?"

"They were taken by Mr. Krebs to the cutting and polishing rooms, and were delivered by him to the men who were to work upon them."

"These men work in cages, do they not?"

"In something very like cages—yes. It is always their choice to do so, for the reason that if, after a stone is passed in to one of them and a receipt has been signed for it, it happens to be misplaced, he knows that he alone is responsible, and he searches for it till he finds it. You see, nobody else can get near enough to him to touch one of the stones."

"I see. The cage is not so much to keep him from getting away as it is to prevent others from approaching too near?"

"Exactly."

"Well, what next?"

"The stones remained in these three cages—since you have employed that word to describe them—all that day; that is, throughout the working hours of that day."

"Yes."

"At the proper time, Mr. Krebs went his rounds again, secured the three stones, examined them carefully, to see what had been accomplished in the work required to be done on them, wrapped them in their winding sheets of tissue paper, dropped them into a chamois bag which was made for their reception, and returned them to Mr. Compton."

"Where, I suppose, he received back the receipts he had given in the morning?"

"No; he canceled them, and accepted a receipt from each of the four persons I have mentioned, which states that the stones were returned safely to them after having been out of their custody during certain specified hours and minutes. For example, if the stones were delivered to Krebs at eight-fifty-nine in the morning, and he returned them at four-two in the afternoon, the receipts would so state."

"Tell me this," said the detective.

"Yes."

"Did Compton and his three assistants receipt for the chamois bag and contents, or did they receipt for the diamonds?"

"Eh? They receipted for the diamonds, of course."

"Did they see the diamonds when they receipted for them? I mean, were the bags opened, and the stones examined, to see that they were all right before the receipts were given?"

"Certainly."

"You are positive about that? In this particular case, I mean?"

"Yes; I am positive, for I have asked the question."

"Did each of the four men—that is, did Compton and his three assistants—see the diamonds on that particular occasion when Krebs returned them to Compton?"

"Yes. They say they did."

"You believe that they did see them?"

"I do."

"Now, go on with your story."

"That is all there is to it."

"All there is to it! What do you mean?"

"I mean that when Krebs went after the diamonds the following morning, to take them to the workmen, they had disappeared."

"Then, if the question of receipts were the only test in this case, you would hold Compton and his assistants responsible for the loss of the diamonds?"

"Yes; if the receipts were the only test, as you say."

"The point is, that the diamonds disappeared between the time of the delivery of them by Krebs to Compton, at 4:02 P. M. of one day, and 8:50 A. M. of the following day, when he went after them again?"

"Precisely that."

"Is there any suggestion of doubt in the mind of Compton that he received the three gems intact from Krebs the preceding day?"

"He has not the slightest doubt about it."

"Is Compton a diamond expert himself?"

"Yes; and a good one, too."

"Is there any suggestion of doubt in the mind of any one of his assistants about the receipt of the diamonds intact from Krebs?"

"Not one of them has any doubt on that point."

"Compton and his three assistants are equally satisfied, are they, that the three diamonds were duly received by them, and deposited by them in the safe, at the time they receipted to Krebs for them?"

"They are."

"Whose hand was it that received them from Krebs?"

"Compton's."

"Whose hand was it that deposited them in the safe?"

"Compton's."

"Whose hand was it that closed the door of the safe afterward?"

"Compton's."

"Whose hand was it that turned the dial of the safe to lock it?"

"Compton's."

"You say that, when Krebs delivered the chamois bag containing the gems to Compton, that the bag was opened and the stones were examined?"

"Yes."

"Who opened the bag?"

"Compton."

"Who extracted the gems from the bag?"

"Compton."

"Did he retain the stones in his possession, or were they passed from one to another of the assistants for examination?"

"They were passed from hand to hand."

"So that each of the assistants, as well as Compton, had an opportunity to see that they were all there, and that they were all right, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose they were returned, one by one, to Compton, who dropped them inside the bag again? Is that the idea?"

"Yes."

"Do you know whether Compton and the others signed the receipts to Krebs before or after the gems were deposited in the safe?"

"Afterward. After the safe had been closed and locked."

"You know that to be so, do you?"

"Yes."

"What sort of a lock is on that safe?"

"A time lock."

"Indeed! What time was it set to open in the morning?"

"Eight-forty-five, Mr. Carter; and Krebs was there when it was opened."

CHAPTER III.

SUSPICION POINTS TOWARD COMPTON.

"Do you mean that Krebs was on hand that morning before the safe was opened?" asked the detective.

"Yes."

"How did that happen?"

"It was not an unusual occurrence for him to be there prepared to receive the gems that were being worked on as soon as the safe was opened, and on that particular morning he was on hand two or three minutes before the time lock operated."

"And then? Tell me what happened then."

"I have already told you what happened then."

"Tell me again."

"Mr. Krebs called for the diamonds. Mr. Compton turned to get them. They heard him gasp, as if for breath. Then they saw him stoop forward eagerly and appear to search the interior of the safe. Then——"

"Where were the three assistants all this time?"

"Standing on either side of him."

"Well, go on."

"Compton turned half around, and tried to smile. Then, to one of his assistants, he said: 'My eyesight is getting poor, I'm afraid. I can't find the "triplets."'"

"And then?"

"They all searched, but without avail. The diamonds were not there."

"And the chamois bag—where was that?"

"With the diamonds, I suppose."

"It was not there?"

"No; it was gone, of course."

"Why, of course? If the chamois bag had been there, with paste substitutes, or——"

"But it was not there. It was gone."

"The safe was searched thoroughly, I suppose?"

"Everything was taken out of it, to the last article. A complete inventory of the contents of the safe was made on the spot. The pear-shaped diamonds were missing."

"Was anything else missing?"

"Not another thing."

"There were other gems of value in that safe, I suppose?"

"Yes; more than a million dollars' worth of them."

"Nothing else had been disturbed?"

"Nothing."

"Or misplaced?"

"Not a thing had been misplaced, as far as could be determined."

"Were you called to the scene of the search in person?"

"I happened to be there when the discovery of the loss was made."

"Indeed! You were there, then, when the safe was opened?"

"I was."

"I don't suppose you happened to be there, did you, when the safe was closed the preceding night?"

"No; I was not there at that time."

"Those diamonds did not get away from there without hands to take them, did they, Mr. Storms?"

"It isn't very likely that they did."

"Well, let us begin by an understanding of how many hands touched them that day."

"Why, there was——"

"Wait a moment. Compton took them from the safe in the morning."

"Yes."

"He and his four assistants examined them then."

"No; only Mr. Krebs examined them at that time."

"How is that?"

"Mr. Compton knew that the diamonds were inside the chamois bag, because he had placed them there the preceding night. He gave the bag into Krebs' hands unopened; but, before Mr. Krebs signed the receipt for the diamonds, he opened the bag and examined them."

"I see. Now, I suppose there were three different men who worked on those diamonds that day, weren't there?"

"Yes; one man on each of the stones."

"Exactly. Have you talked with those men since that time?"

"Yes, with each one of them."

"So you know it was the pear-shaped diamonds that they worked upon that day, eh?"

"Yes."

"At night they returned them to Krebs—each of them, eh?"

"Certainly."

"And Krebs took them back to Compton; and, when they did get back to Compton, they were each handled by four different men?"

"Yes; that is—understand me, Mr. Carter—by handling a diamond, one does not imply that the stone is taken between the thumb and fingers and rolled about, you know. By handling, as I use the term, I mean that the diamonds are uncovered, so that they can be inspected and recognized by an expert."

"Certainly. I understand."

"While that is done, the diamond rests on its bed of tissue paper. As soon as it is recognized, it is passed on, or is wrapped in the paper and returned to the bag made to hold it."

"Precisely."

"That was what was done in this case; and, with that understanding established, we can say that four men handled them when they were returned to Compton by Krebs."

"Do you know if each of the four men actually held the stones, or the papers which contained the stones, in his hands?"

"I do not; but it is not at all likely that they did so."

"What did they do, if not that?"

"Why, I cannot say exactly, but the usual proceeding is for the man who receives them to open the package which contains them, and to exhibit the gems as they rest upon a piece of paper in the palm of his hand. Any one of the others is, of course, at liberty to make a closer inspection, if he cares to do so, but I don't think it is generally done."

"Diamonds with which a person is familiar are, I suppose, easily recognizable, particularly among experts?" asked Nick.

"Diamonds are as recognizable as faces—as human faces—Mr. Carter. A glance is all that is necessary."

"Then you think it is probable that, when these diamonds were returned to Mr. Compton by Mr. Krebs, the only hands which really touched the package that contained them were Compton's, do you?"

"Why, yes; I think so. I have not inquired into that point particularly."

"I wish you would do so."

"Very well; I will do so."

"Now, let us touch upon these several persons, if you please."

"What several persons?"

"Those who were present at the time the diamonds were deposited in the safe—or at the time they were supposed to have been deposited in the safe; for you will agree with me, will you not, that they did not go into the safe at all that night?"

"That seems to be the only explanation of their disappearance; and yet——"

"We haven't quite got to the 'and yet,' Mr. Storms. Tell me about Krebs."

"Mr. Krebs is a member of the firm, Carter."

"I don't care if he is. Tell me about him."

"Do you mean to ask me if I believe him capable of an act of dishonesty?"

"Heavens and earth, no! But is he a careful man?"

"Why, yes; we are all careful men in our business."

"You think you are, but are you? Does Krebs like to joke and tell stories?"

"I think he is rather a joker. I know that he does like to tell stories. But what of that?"

"Is he the sort of a man who would be likely to have a new story to tell to Compton at the time he went to him to get the diamonds, or when he returned them to his custody?"

"It is very possible."

"As a matter of fact, he was telling a story, was he

not, when you stood near him at the time the disappearance of the diamonds was discovered?"

"Yes, he was; and we were all laughing. But look here, I don't understand how you managed to jump at that conclusion, Carter."

"I didn't jump at it. I guessed at it."

"Well, it is true, although I had forgotten it until you mentioned it."

"I suppose that he is such a confirmed story-teller that you—and others—have come to regard his stories, and to expect them, as a matter of course, eh?"

"Quite so."

"Do you happen to know if he was telling a story at the time he returned the diamonds to Compton the afternoon they were stolen?"

"I don't know about that. I was not there at the time."

"But it is more than likely that he was doing so, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think it is."

"Now, if you please, we will pass from Krebs to Compton. Is he also a story-teller?"

"I would like to know what the devil stories, or the telling of stories, have got to do with this case, Carter?" said the president of the jewelry company, impatiently. "It seems to me——"

"Is Compton also a story-teller?" repeated Nick, calmly, and then he added: "You will see what I am driving at presently."

"No, Compton is not a story-teller at all. He is a very silent man."

"Then he is a good listener, eh?"

"I suppose he is, because he talks very little himself."

"Is he a good-natured chap, or is he grouchy?"

"He is a very kind man, and full of humor, in a quaint and quiet way. He enjoys a joke, although I have never heard him utter one."

"But he likes Krebs' stories, doesn't he?"

"Everybody likes Krebs' stories; he has an inimitable manner of telling them."

"Is Compton also a member of the firm, Mr. Storms?"

"No."

"Is he a high-salaried man?"

"Yes, he gets a big salary. We pay him ten thousand a year."

"Ten thousand a year," mused Nick, aloud, "for taking the responsibility of more than a million a day. That is, ten thousand a year for holding the responsibility of three hundred and sixty-five millions, eh?"

The president flushed angrily.

"That has nothing whatever to do with the matter, sir," he said. "We think we are very liberal about the salaries we pay."

"And I have no doubt you are. How long a time has Mr. Compton been in your employ?"

"He has been with the firm more than twenty years; he has occupied his present position ten years."

"He wouldn't steal diamonds, would he?" asked Nick, with a twinkle in his eyes; but, very much to the surprise of the detective, Mr. Storms did not at once reply; nor was he looking at Nick when he did answer.

It was a half-apologetic tone he used when he did speak, and one which he was evidently ashamed of, as well as the words he uttered; but what he said was this:

"I am positive in my own mind, Mr. Carter, that Compton is as trustworthy a man as lives; and yet, as you said a moment ago, the diamonds could not have gone away without hands to take them."

"You mean?" said Nick, tentatively.

"I mean, Mr. Carter, that the only solution I can see to this problem is that Compton did take them. It is an awful—a horrible—thing to say, but what other view can I take? Carter, it is on Compton's account that I have called you into this case. If Compton is a thief, I want to know it; but, more than anything in the world, I want you to prove that he is not one."

CHAPTER IV.

A CASE WITHOUT A CLEW.

There was a moment of oppressive silence between the two men, which Nick, for reasons of his own, chose not to break.

"I will speak plainly to you, Carter," said Storms, presently, and with an evident effort.

"Certainly," said Nick. "That is the only reason for this interview, as I understand it."

"I cannot believe that Compton is guilty."

"No?"

"And yet I cannot assure myself that he is not."

"Well?"

"I find myself thinking out methods by which he may have accomplished the theft."

"As, for instance——"

"Sleight of hand."

"Eh? How so?"

"It has occurred to me that he might have palmed those diamonds, or, rather, the chamois bag which contained them, when he appeared to return them to the safe."

"That is quite a reasonable assumption, Mr. Storms."

"You think it might be true?"

"I think it could be true."

"It is the only way in which I can account for the mystery."

"Do you know Compton to be expert at that sort of thing?"

"No, I do not."

"Have you heard that he has ever performed tricks of that sort?"

"No, I have not; but he might have taken lessons for this express purpose."

"That, too, is possible."

"You made, a moment ago, a remark which exactly appealed to that view of the case; it was when you said that the diamonds could not have gone away without hands to take them."

"Yes. I remember. But right here let me ask you something."

"Well?"

"Suppose Compton did take them, what good would they do him?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"How could he dispose of them?"

"I don't think he could dispose of them, unless he had them split into smaller gems and then cut and polished again."

"And there would arise another danger of discovery—no?"

"Certainly."

"So it follows that, whoever did take those stones, must already have made arrangements with a practical diamond polisher; don't you think so?"

"Yes; decidedly yes."

"Krebs is such, is he not?"

"Yes."

"If you regard it as logical to suspect Compton, is it not also logical to suspect the other man?"

"Krebs?"

"Yes."

"But he is a member of the firm. I have never once thought of him in connection with the theft."

"I suppose not; but I repeat, is it not as logical to suspect him as it is to suspect Compton?"

"Possibly it is."

"And if you suspect one, and by analogy the other also, then we must arrive at the conclusion that they were accomplices in the act, eh?"

"Good Heaven, Carter, I don't go as far as that!"

Nick smiled.

"I only wished to ascertain how far you would go," he said. "I don't think it wise to permit our suspicions to fall upon any individual just yet, Mr. Storms. We have not gone far enough into the case for that—yet; and we had not finished our delineation of the characters of the men who were present at the closing and the opening of the safe. The three assistants remain."

"Yes."

"What of them, Mr. Storms?"

"What do you wish to know about them?"

"First, who are they? Name them, if you please, in the order of their importance in the business of the firm."

"Then I should name George Graham first."

"What of him? How old is he? What salary does he get? Tell me all about him."

"He is about thirty, married, lives at Bay Ridge, receives two thousand a year, and is a steady, honest fellow, who has been in our employ for the last ten years, and with whom we have never had a word of fault to find."

"That is a good record. Who is the next one?"

"Henry Shaw."

"What of him?"

"Henry is a son of an old friend of mine. He has been with us five years. He is twenty-five or six, receives a salary of eighteen hundred, lives in One Hundred and Fifty-fifth Street, with his parents, and has always had the confidence of his employers."

"Now, the third, if you please?"

"His name is Daniel Dean. He lives over in Brooklyn, on the street that bears his name. He is somewhere near thirty years old, unmarried, gets eighteen hundred a year, and has a good record with the firm."

"That is, practically, all you know about any of them, I suppose?" asked Nick.

"Yes, it is."

"You know nothing of their habits when they are away from the store?"

"Nothing; only that their habits cannot be very bad, or they would have been less punctual and less attentive to business."

"That is, doubtless, quite true."

"Besides, I don't see how any one of them could have had an opportunity to commit the theft. The only man—absolutely the only man—who had such an opportunity is Compton."

"You are determined to suspect him of being the guilty party, I see," said Nick, smiling.

"No, I am not. I am determined not to do so; but the thought returns to me with redoubled force every time I put it away from me."

"We must not let our suspicions rest upon a single person as yet. We must wait," said the detective, firmly. "If you permit yourself to distrust one person, you will end by distrusting all of them."

"Well, it is certain that we must suspect one of the four, is it not?"

"I am not by any means sure of that yet."

"You are not?"

"No."

"Then how——"

"I cannot answer the question you are about to ask, so don't ask it. But I will remind you that seemingly impossible things are happening all around us every day of our lives. This is a seemingly impossible occurrence. The happening of it is apparently inexplicable, but that there is an explanation of it somewhere is proved by the fact that the diamonds are missing.

"Now, it would be by no means an impossible, or even a difficult, thing to do to palm that chamois-skin bag, as

you suggested, and to perform the act without the slightest danger of detection by the others who stood near; that is, it would not have been impossible or difficult for an expert in sleight of hand to do it.

"But we have first to establish the plausibility of it—and it does not seem quite plausible to me."

"What theory can you substitute for it?"

"I haven't substituted any yet. I am waiting."

"I see."

"And I am going to ask you to leave me now. I want to turn this whole matter over in my mind with considerable care before I discuss it with you again."

"Very well. It is time I was back at the store."

"We understand, do we, that no one at the store, aside from yourself, is to know about my connection with the case?"

"Certainly."

"And I trust that you will not permit your manner toward Compton to show that there is a change in your feelings toward him."

"I won't. I am determined about that myself."

"Very good."

"When will I see you again, Mr. Carter?"

"I will find a way to let you know when I wish to see you—and, in the meantime, I want you to be assured that I am deeply interested in the case."

"Do you think you can unravel the tangle, Carter?"

"I shall certainly make a very determined effort to do so."

"God knows that I hope you will succeed; and also that I hope it will not be old Compton whom you run to earth."

"I somehow do not think it will be he, Mr. Storms. I have never seen the man, to my own knowledge, but I have an intuitive idea that he is not the guilty party."

"I hope not—I hope not," murmured Storms; and then, shaking his head in perplexity and doubt, he took his departure.

He was no sooner gone than the detective hastened out of the building, although he did not give up the room which he had taken under the name of Felix Parsons; it occurred to him that he might have further use for it, although he was not certain of that point.

When he left the hotel he hastened at once to his own home.

"Chick," he said, as soon as he entered, "there is work for all of you to-night. You and Ten-Ichi and Patsy."

"All right, sir," said Chick.

Nick smiled, for it was rarely that Chick said "sir" to him. They were much too intimate for formalities.

"There are three men at Orloff's whom I want shadowed to-night," he said. "Their names are George Graham, Henry Shaw and Daniel Dean. The first lives at Bay Ridge, the second at Washington Heights and the third in Brooklyn, on Dean Street."

"Which one shall I take?" asked Chick.

"Dean—the last one I named. Put Patsy onto Graham, and Ten-Ichi on Shaw."

"Very well."

"I want you all to report here as soon as your respective duties are done for the night. That is, as soon as you have put them to bed. For to-night, I merely wish to know what each one of them does to-night. If there is more shadowing to be done, we will know about it later, or, at least, I will have more to say on the subject in the morning."

"Very good."

"I haven't a suggestion to give you. This is a case without a clew."

"So I supposed."

"There is not the shadow of a clew to be found anywhere. There has evidently been a rare play at sleight of hand somewhere, and there has been collusion somewhere. Whoever it was who stole the diamonds had assistance of some sort, but whether that assistance was active, or merely passive, cannot now be determined. To-morrow I expect I will have other work for you."

"You always keep the hardest for yourself."

"Yes; and I'm going to undertake the hardest and most delicate task of my life to-night."

"You are! How so, Nick?"

"I am going to accuse a man whom I am sure is innocent of having stolen those gems."

"A man whom you know to be innocent?"

"A man whom I believe to be innocent. But I am going to accuse him of the crime, just the same, and I think I will find out something by doing so, too. That sounds like a paradox, doesn't it? Well, I shall do it, just the same, and it is no paradox, either."

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN WHO IS SUSPECTED.

When the detective left his first assistant and started out to make his call upon Edward Compton, he was not unmindful of the fact that in making this call, and in carrying out the purpose he had in view in connection with it, he would betray the very fact which he had urged President Storms to conceal—that is, his own connection with the case.

But Nick Carter's insistence on that point was only intended to apply so far as the establishment of Orloff & Co. was concerned; he reserved to himself the right and the privilege to reveal the fact himself whenever and wheresoever he pleased.

The status of the case, as explained to him by Mr. Storms, was such that he felt that his real source of information existed in the propinquity of Compton to the mysterious occurrence.

Without any good or logical reason for believing in the

innocence of the man—for it will be remembered that Nick had never knowingly seen him at all—he still did believe in it; but, acting upon a theory which had often assisted him over a difficult point, he did believe that Compton must have a subconscious knowledge of the theft.

This theory has been explained many times in the Nick Carter stories, but, in order that the reader may get a clear idea of it, a short statement here will not be amiss.

Nick Carter believed that, wherever a person is present at the happening of an unusual event, his knowledge concerning that event is much more thorough and comprehensive than he himself believes.

It is only the trained mind that is capable of grasping details in their entirety; the ordinary comprehension grasps only the salient points, notwithstanding the fact that he does see the details.

But these details are forgotten—that is, they remain dormant in the mind—hidden, and therefore forgotten, under the overwhelming sequence of the salient points of the incident.

These details, seen, observed, but forgotten, Nick Carter described by the word subconscious, and he had many times, by shrewd questioning, succeeded in obtaining information from a person which that person had no idea he possessed.

He intended to apply this theory to Compton.

He argued that Compton really knew who stole the diamonds, although he might not be aware of the fact that he did know it.

This statement seems absurd on the face of it, but, if you will follow Nick Carter with me to the house of Edward Compton, you will speedily be made aware of its logic and its truth.

The detective timed himself so that he would arrive at the house where Compton lived at about the hour when that gentleman should have finished his dinner, and when he would, therefore, be in a complacent mood, with his mind at rest after the efforts of the day.

In this he succeeded admirably, for Compton had, in reality, just lighted his cigar after his evening meal.

The reader must understand that the detective did not go to Compton's house in the disguise he had worn during the earlier part of the day—the one in which he had called himself Felix Parsons. Instead, he made a few slight changes—enough so that, if Compton had chanced to see him during his call at the establishment of Orloff & Co., he would not recognize him, and yet the changes were so slight that he could readily, and almost at a moment's notice, resume the guise of the man who had taken the rooms at the Waldorf.

Edward Compton happened to answer the bell in person when Nick rang for admittance, and the detective knew at once, from the general description he had of the man, who he was.

"Mr. Compton, I believe?" he said, tentatively.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "What can I do for you?"

"You can give me, if you will be so good, half an hour of your time," replied the detective. "There is a matter of importance which I wish to discuss with you—in private, if you please, Mr. Compton."

"Really, sir——" began Mr. Compton, but the detective interrupted him.

"I wish to talk with you about the 'triplets,'" said Nick, smiling.

Compton started, and flushed hotly. Then, recovering himself, he asked, quietly:

"By what authority, sir?"

"I have been retained by one of the members of the firm of Orloff & Co. to do what I can in the way of an investigation of the mystery, Mr. Compton," replied Nick, "and I thought the best place to interview you would be here at your own home."

The detective was still standing upon the doorstep, for Compton had not invited him to enter; nor had he, in fact, moved from his position directly in front of the detective, which effectually barred entrance to the house.

"I cannot accept your bare statement for that, sir," said Compton, firmly. "Unless you can show me some authority which I will recognize—some authority from the firm—I cannot consent to discuss the matter with you at all."

"I quite appreciate your delicacy on the subject, Mr. Compton," said Nick, smiling again. "I know that it has been the effort and the intention from the first to keep the knowledge of the theft of the diamonds as secret as possible; but, all the same, you must talk with me; and, as to the place where we shall hold that conversation, it rests with yourself."

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"I mean that I came here to talk quietly with you in your own parlor—and that if you refuse to accede to that wish on my part——"

"Well?"

"Why, then the interview will be conducted under much less pleasant auspices; that is all, Mr. Compton."

"And still I do not understand you."

"Has it occurred to you, Mr. Compton, that there are those who suspect you of complicity in this affair?" asked Nick, quietly.

"Yes, sir, it has," was the equally quiet reply.

"Have you regarded it as possible that there might already be a warrant out for your arrest?"

"I have considered such a possibility," was the calm response.

"Will you consent now to discuss the matter with me?"

"No, sir; at least, not unless I am satisfied of your right to talk with me about it; or, rather, of my right to talk with you. Who are you?"

Nick realized that the man before him was in serious

earnest, and he rather liked the stand that Compton took in the matter; it argued for the detective's belief in him better than anything else could have done.

Here was a man who thoroughly realized the position in which he stood in regard to the theft; who realized that, notwithstanding the fact that he had been connected with the firm upward of twenty years, suspicion was, nevertheless, likely to light upon him, but who still regarded his duty to his employers as paramount to his own interests.

Nick Carter liked him the better for it.

"Who are you, sir?" repeated Compton.

"Will you permit me to enter the house for a moment before I reply to that question?" asked Nick, in reply. "I think I can very quickly satisfy you as to who and what I am."

"Very well, sir; come in."

Compton turned and led the way to his library, where he closed the door behind them.

"Now, sir?" he said, without, however, offering the detective a chair.

"Do you happen to know, Mr. Compton, that Mr. Krebs was called into the private office of your president this afternoon to inspect some diamonds which a stranger had brought there for sale?" asked Nick.

"I do happen to be aware of that," replied Compton, with some surprise.

"Did you see the man who had the diamonds for sale?"

"I did—both when he entered and when he left the private office."

"Very good. Would you know him—that is, would you recognize him—if you should see him again?"

"I most certainly would, sir. But will you tell me what all this has to do with the matter in hand?"

"Permit me to turn my back to you for a moment," said Nick; and, without waiting for the permission, he wheeled around and rapidly made the few necessary changes to restore him to the character of Felix Parsons.

When he had accomplished that, he wheeled again and confronted the now thoroughly astonished Compton.

"Do you observe that gentleman before you now?" asked Nick, with a smile.

"I must confess, sir, that I do."

"I was that man, as you now know. I am Nick Carter. I went to your establishment in response to a letter from your Mr. Beauchamp, in which I was requested to call upon Mr. Storms. For reasons which will presently be obvious to you, I preferred to make that call in disguise, and I carried out the idea so well that not a soul in the building was aware that a detective had called upon your president. Later, I had a private interview with Mr. Storms in another part of the city, and at the present moment you and he alone know of my connection with the case. Here is the letter received from Mr. Beauchamp."

Compton had made no remark while Nick was making his explanation, and he now took the secretary's letter and read it through to the end in silence; and in silence he returned it.

"Are you satisfied now, Mr. Compton?" asked the detective.

"Perfectly."

"You are prepared to discuss the matter with me?"

"Yes; as far as I can do so."

"Before we enter upon the subject, may I have your assurance that you will respect the secrecy concerning my connection with the case, which Mr. Storms and I regard as necessary?"

"Certainly, sir."

There was a moment of silence, and then, with studied deliberation, Nick Carter said:

"Mr. Compton, I came here with the deliberate intention of charging you with complicity in this affair."

"Don't you think that you were rather jumping at conclusions, Mr. Carter?" asked Compton, with a grim smile.

"I did not say that I suspected you of complicity, but that I intended to charge you with it," replied Nick.

"That is a distinction without a difference, is it not?"

"Perhaps so."

"May I ask you if you have changed your mind? And, if so, why?"

"I have changed my mind, sir, and I have done so because I believe that we can best assist each other in this matter by the exercise of entire frankness. Will you meet me halfway, Mr. Compton, and be as frank with me in what is to follow as I have already been with you?"

"I will try to do so, if I am assured that the interests of the firm I serve will be benefited thereby."

"As I understand Mr. Storms," said Nick, "you are the last man who is known to have handled those diamonds."

"I am."

"Then you are the one man among all the others who is most vitally interested in having the mystery of their disappearance cleared up."

"That is certainly true."

"Then, shall we get down to business, work together and jointly do our utmost to solve the mystery?"

"There is nothing in the world which I desire so much to do, Mr. Carter."

"In that case, I think we begin on fair grounds, and with some hope of success. There has never been a mystery for which there was not some explanation. It remains for us to find what this one is—and I think we will find it."

"God grant that we may, sir! You do not know how much it means to me."

CHAPTER VI.

FINE POINTS IN THE CASE.

"Mr. Compton," said the detective, after a short pause, during which the two men studied each other narrowly—Nick for the purpose of deciding just how far he could go with the questions he wished to ask, and Compton to satisfy himself beyond the peradventure of a doubt that he could place entire confidence in the man who had called upon him so strangely—"Mr. Compton, has it ever occurred to you that sometimes we are perfectly aware of certain facts without in the least realizing that we know them?"

"Yes, sir. I have thought of that a great many times; especially have I believed it in connection with this case."

"Will you explain just what you mean by the last part of your reply," said the detective.

"I mean, in a word, that I cannot overcome the idea that I ought to know just how those diamonds were stolen. I mean that deep down in my consciousness—out of my reach, perhaps, but there, just the same—there must be knowledge of how those diamonds were taken. It is like gold that is hidden away in quartz, Mr. Carter; one must blast the rock to get it out."

"Exactly," commented Nick, well pleased by the penetration of the elder man.

"I was there, on the spot, when they were taken; there can be no question about that. I know—no matter what others may suspect—I know that I did not take them, and, therefore, I should know who did take them. Now, sir, I believe that I do know who took them. I have no suspicions, mind you. Not the least one in the world; and yet——"

"I thoroughly understand you. It was precisely upon that very point I wished to question you, and I am more pleased than I can say that you are of the same mind as myself."

"I ought to know who took those stones—but I do not."

"Like you, I believe that you do, but without knowing that you know."

"Yes?"

"Subconscious knowledge is a pet theory of mine, and more than once I have traced out the mysteries of a crime by its aid."

"Then, pray, do so now, if you can. I am entirely at your disposal."

"Let us begin, then, at the instant when Mr. Krebs gave the chamois bag containing the diamonds into your hands."

"Yes."

"Were you standing near together?"

"Near enough for him to give them to me without effort."

"There was no screen of any sort between you?"

"None whatever."

"Is not the safe surrounded by a heavy, wire screen?"

"My department is so surrounded; not the safe itself."

"How large is the space you designate as your own department?"

"Approximately, fifteen feet square."

"And that is inclosed—tell me exactly how it is inclosed."

"By the outer wall of the building on one side and by heavy, wire screens, eight feet in height, on the remaining three sides."

"There are other departments on either side of you, I suppose?"

"Yes; and a general passageway in front."

"There is a door through that screen to the passageway, of course. Now, is that door usually kept closed?"

"No; as a matter of fact, it is rarely closed. My desk stands between that door and the safe, and the safe is always closed."

"And locked, as well?"

"Yes; with the day lock."

"What is the day lock?"

"It is a simple combination lock attached to the inside doors of the safe."

"How many persons know the combination of that day lock?"

"My three assistants and myself."

"Do your assistants frequently open the safe by use of the day lock?"

"Certainly. That is what they are there for."

"Suppose that during the day a certain necklace, we will say, should be sent for, and you requested one of your assistants to get it from the safe. Tell me just what the *modus operandi* would be in such a case."

"I would say, for example, 'Mr. Dean, will you get the necklace for Mr. So-and-So?' He at once would go to the safe and procure the necklace. Having taken it from the safe, and again closed it, he would bring the necklace first to me for my inspection. Then he would pass around to the remaining two assistants and exhibit it to them. Each of us would nod acquiescence, and then Dean would pass the package to the man who came for it, taking in return the receipts which I have no doubt have been described to you."

"Yes."

"Dean would then bring me my receipt, and place the others on the desks of the assistants, retaining one himself. That is all there is to it, save that when the necklace was returned the receipt would be canceled and filed away."

"Now, will you take your mind back to the moment when Krebs gave the diamonds into your possession, the night of their disappearance?"

"Yes."

"What time was it?"

"The time stamped upon the canceled receipt is two minutes past four o'clock."

"Was Krebs telling one of his stories at the time?"

"Yes, I believe he was."

"Don't you know whether he was or not?"

"Certainly."

"Then say so, Mr. Compton. We are looking for facts now, not for conjectures."

"Very good. I understand."

"You have said that there was no screen between you and Krebs when he gave the diamonds to you."

"There was not."

"Then, am I to understand that he came through the door in the screen into your department?"

"Yes, he did that."

"Where were you?"

"I was seated at my desk."

"Did you remain seated when he handed the diamonds to you?"

"Yes."

"Where were your assistants?"

"They left their desks and came over to mine."

"Was it their duty to do that?"

"Yes, and no. It is a custom with them. It is necessary that all of us should see the diamonds before they go into the safe, and whoever receiyes them is supposed to show them to the others. In the case of stones as valuable as those, it is customary for us to view them at the same time, instead of separately, as we would do in an ordinary case."

"So it was really in the line of their duty for them to group themselves around your desk at that time, eh?"

"Yes."

"Was any other person present than Krebs, yourself and your three assistants?"

"Mr. Storms was there, but he was outside the inclosure—that is, outside the screen."

"Anyone else?"

"One of the guides, who show patrons through the building when they express a desire to see it, was standing not far from Mr. Storms."

"Did he have one of these patrons with him?"

"There was a lady with him, I believe——"

"Don't you know?"

"Excuse me; there was a lady with him, who, I suppose, he had been conducting through the establishment."

"They were, of course, outside the screen?"

"Of course. Strangers are never allowed inside any of the screens."

"Do you recall the appearance of the woman?"

"Not at all. I merely noticed that it was a woman, that is all."

"Then it was nobody whom you know?"

"No."

"Was Storms standing near them? Was he conversing with the woman?"

"He was near where she was standing, but I do not remember that he talked with her."

"Did you remain seated when the chamois bag was handed to you?"

"No; I rose and seated myself again upon one corner of my desk."

"Describe, as nearly as you can, the exact positions, relative to the safe, occupied by each person who was inside the inclosure at that time."

"The inclosure," replied Compton, slowly, "is practically a perfect square. My desk is located as nearly as possible in the center of that square. My three assistants occupy small desks. Two of them—Shaw and Graham—are near the windows; that is, at the north side of the inclosure. The entrance is in the middle of the east side. Dean's desk is to the left of the entrance, and you come in through the doorway. The safe stands at the west side of the inclosure."

"Very well," said Nick. "I have those positions thoroughly in mind now. Where were the several individuals standing at the time of the transfer of the diamonds to you?"

"Krebs stood at the east side of my desk. I was seated on what you might term the northeast corner of the desk after I rose from my chair. Dean stood at the south side of my own desk. Graham and Shaw were on my left—that is, they were between me and the north side of the inclosure."

"Now, when the diamonds were handed to you, did you at once remove them from the bag that contained them, and submit them to joint examination?"

"Not at once. I held the bag in my hand a moment or two before I did that."

"While you listened to the story that Krebs was telling, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And then what did you do?"

"I opened the bag, removed the diamonds, glanced at them, while Graham and Shaw leaned over in my direction to do the same. Dean was at the opposite side of the desk, as I have explained, and so I passed the diamonds to him."

"Did you also give him the chamois bag?"

"No; I retained that."

"What happened then?"

"Why, nothing happened then. Dean glanced at the stones, folded the tissue paper over them, handed them back to me, and I dropped them inside the bag."

"Krebs was continuing with his story during this time, was he not?"

"Yes."

"And you were listening?"

"Of course. We were all listening."

"During how long an interval of time do you suppose that Dean held the stones in his possession?"

"How long? Perhaps half a dozen seconds."

"When they were returned to you, and you replaced them in the bag, did you immediately deposit them inside the safe?"

"Yes, immediately."

"And did you close and lock the safe at that time?"

"The inside door; the day lock, yes."

"But not the big door, eh?"

"Oh, no. That was not closed and locked until a few minutes past five."

"And that door is controlled by a time lock, is it not?"

"Certainly."

"Now, tell me, is that lock reset every day, or does the time for which it is set to open stand from day to day, right along?"

"It is reset every night."

"Why is that done?"

"I don't know that there is any logical reason for it, save that it has always been the custom in the establishment. For example, to-morrow morning the lock will open at eight-thirty. Yesterday morning it was set for eight-fifty. The day after to-morrow it may be at eight-fifteen."

"Whose business is it to set the time lock when the safe is closed for the night?"

"Mine, of course; but often one of my assistants attends to it."

"Did you set the lock when you left the store this afternoon?"

"No; Graham did it. You see, it makes no difference which one of us attends to that duty since each of us is aware of the time when the safe is to open in the morning, and we all must be there at that time—unless, of course, one of us is detained unavoidably, in which case an extra assistant would be detailed to me from another department."

"I understand, then, that sometimes you set the time lock, and at other times one or another of your assistants attends to that duty?"

"Exactly."

"Who set the time lock the night of the robbery?"

"Dean, I think."

"Don't you know?"

"I am not positive, but I think it was Dean."

"You keep no record of who performs that duty each day?"

"No; no such record has ever been kept."

"But you feel assured that Dean did it that night, eh?"

"Yes; I am quite positive. I will ask him in the morning. It is a point that had not occurred to me before, and I do not now see what difference it makes."

"Possibly not. Nevertheless, I would like to know."

"I will find out positively in the morning."

"Do so. What time do you go to your luncheon, Mr. Compton?"

"At noon."

"Then I wish you would meet me at Dorlon's at one and give me this information; will you do so?"

"Certainly."

"Now, will you give your attention to another branch of the subject? When the safe is finally locked for the night, and the work of the day is done, how is the building evacuated by the clerks in the several departments? More particularly, in your own department, what is the precise operation of closing up and leaving the department and the building? I wish to know just what takes place from the moment that safe is finally locked until you and your three assistants are all in the street. Please see that you omit no detail. Be as explicit as if your life depended upon it."

"I will," replied Compton; and he settled himself in his chair, and knitted his brows in the effort of concentration.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NAME OF THE THIEF.

"Everything in the establishment closes at five in the afternoon," began Mr. Compton.

"My experience has been that there is rarely a day in the week when I am not ready to close and lock the safe in my department as early as five or ten minutes before five, and it is often the case that it is closed and locked as early as four-forty-five."

"You mean by that, I suppose," said Nick, "that the jewels from the several departments of the establishment which are left with you for safe-keeping overnight are usually returned to your custody some time before the closing hour?"

"Precisely. It is the busy time for my assistants and myself, and sometimes I am especially occupied. It is at such times that I delegate the duty of setting the time lock to one of my assistants."

"Exactly."

"When the safe is closed and locked for the day, our duties are practically done. There are always a few odds and ends to put together; the recipts—that is, the canceled receipts—to lock away in a smaller safe that is kept for the purpose. I usually leave this latter duty to one of my assistants and go to the washroom. Then I

return to my department, put on my hat, bid the others 'Good-night,' and go."

"So you are usually the first one from your department to leave the building?"

"N-no; that does not follow, although I believe it is the usual case."

"Your assistants also go to the washroom, I suppose, and then return to the department for their street coats and hats, eh?"

"Oh, yes. The one point is that every occupant of the building, clerk or otherwise, must, by the hour of half-past five, report 'in' or 'out' of the establishment."

"What do you mean by reporting 'in or out'?"

"I mean that, if there is nothing to detain me there, I must report 'out' at a certain door, and that, when I so report, I must pass out. My name is checked off as out. But, if my duties keep me there after five-thirty, I must report, just the same, only I report 'in.' This happens frequently in the bookkeeping department; very, very rarely in mine. I have been there over twenty years, and it has not happened half a dozen times in my experience."

Nick was silent for a moment, and then he asked:

"Suppose you should leave the building at five-fifteen, would that time be recorded at the door as you passed out?"

"No; my name would merely be checked off as having gone out before five-thirty."

"Do you remember whether you were the first or the last to leave your department, and, therefore, the building, on the night of the robbery?"

"I think I was the first to leave. I remember that I was in a hurry that night. I had a dinner engagement to keep with some friends uptown."

Nick was silent again for a few moments, turning over in his mind all that had been told him, and then he asked:

"Now, about the morning, Mr. Compton; what is the rule for reporting for business?"

"We must be at our desks at eight o'clock."

"That is, you must report 'in' before eight, eh?"

"Yes."

"Is there a record kept of the time you do report?"

"Not unless one is late; then there is a record. In my own department we are usually in our places by a quarter before eight. That has been my habit always, and I have insisted upon its fulfillment by my subordinates."

"On the morning when the theft was discovered, which of you was there first, and which was the last to arrive?"

"Graham and I entered the establishment together; Shaw came in a moment afterward, and Dean came a moment or two later."

"Who opened the safe, when it was opened, that morning?"

"I did."

"Krebs was present when the safe was opened, was he not?"

"Yes."

"Now, Mr. Compton, I arrive at the point where there may be some subconscious knowledge possessed by you relative to this affair, and I wish you to reply to my questions with exceeding care."

"I will endeavor, with my utmost effort, to do so."

"When Krebs appeared, to demand the diamonds, did he enter your department, as he did the preceding night when he left the stones with you?"

"No; he remained outside the screen, at the little window."

"Why?"

"If I remember correctly, the door through the screen was closed."

"Who closed it?"

"Why, Dean must have closed it; he was the last one of us to pass through it."

"You have stated that that door is usually open during the day?"

"Yes."

"Was it the habit, however, for the last arrival in the morning to close it when he entered the department?"

"No; the contrary is the rule."

"Do you recall another time when the door has been closed by the last one who entered your department in the morning?"

"No; I do not. I will say, however, that since the robbery the door is kept closed all the time."

"On the principle of locking the stable after the horse has been stolen, eh?"

"It seems to apply here, Mr. Carter."

"Now, carry your mind back to that particular morning, and to that particular moment when you opened the safe."

"My mind has been on it ever since the theft, sir."

"Can you fix in your mind a picture of that inclosure at that moment?"

"Perfectly."

"Then, I wish you to give me a mental photograph of it."

"I don't think I quite understand."

"You will in a moment. Where, for example, was Graham standing at the time?"

"At his own desk, with his back against it, facing me."

"And Shaw—where was he?"

"At his desk, in something of the same attitude as Graham."

"And Dean?"

"Dean was over at one of the windows, looking out upon the street. His back was toward me."

"Was there anything peculiarly noticeable about the attitude of any of your assistants that attracted your attention at that time?"

"I think not."

"Picture Graham in your mind. Was his attitude and demeanor about the same that it is every day when the safe is opened? The expression of his face, the employment of his hands and his other characteristics?"

"I do not recall that I noticed anything different about him."

"Now, apply the same questions to Shaw."

"The answer would be the same."

"And now apply them to Dean."

"You will remember that Dean's back was toward me."

"There are times when there is a great deal of expression in a man's back."

"I don't remember anything about Dean, except that his back was turned, and that he was gazing out of the window."

"Was he in the habit of doing that sort of thing when you were opening the safe?"

"I do not remember that he ever did it before; that, I think, is why I noticed it at that time."

"Precisely. Now, when you opened the safe and discovered that the bag which contained the diamonds was missing, you could not at first believe your own eyes, could you? And you called to one of your assistants, or to all of them, to look for it, did you not?"

"Exactly."

"Do you remember who was the first to rush forward when you made that request?"

"Perfectly. I was dazed by the discovery, but the whole thing is as clear in my recollection as if it had just happened."

"Who was it?"

"Dean."

"Did he rush over to the safe from his place at the window?" asked Nick, slowly.

"Why, no. He was the nearest one to me when I opened the door of the safe."

"So he was the first one to look in the safe after you, eh?"

"Yes."

"What was his conduct at that time? Describe it in detail."

"I heard him exclaim, 'My God, they are not here! The bag is gone!' and then he staggered against one of the doors of the huge safe, and almost collapsed."

"What did he do next? Confine your mind to Dean now, to the exclusion of everything."

"I remember that he crossed the inclosure to his own desk, and dropped into his chair."

"And then?"

"I remember his eyes; they were fixed upon me, with an expression of horror. I noticed it because I thought then, and I think now, that Dean believes I took the diamonds."

Nick Carter smiled broadly.

"What did Dean do after that? From that moment on until the incident was closed for the time being?"

"He remained in his chair at his desk, and all the time his eyes followed me, with that strange stare, which I considered accusing."

"Now, let us have a description of the conduct of Graham throughout the scene."

"I remember that he also went to the safe—not hastily, but deliberately. He has since told me that he had no thought but that I was mistaken, and he believed that I had simply overlooked the stones. He turned, with me, toward the grating where Krebs was waiting, and he grasped me by the arm, to support me, as if I was in danger of falling—as, indeed, I think I was; and he whispered in my ear the one word, 'Courage!'"

"Where was he during the remainder of that scene?"

"At my side, with his hand on my arm, or on my shoulder."

"Did he stare at you, as Dean did?"

"Not at all. His expression was kindly and sympathetic throughout."

"Now, as to Shaw. What of him?"

"Shaw's conduct was almost precisely that of Graham,

only he was on the other side of me, and he did not take my arm as Graham did."

"Then, during the entire scene, Graham flanked you on one side and Shaw on the other, while Dean remained in his seat at his own desk? Is that it?"

"It is, exactly."

"What was Krebs' expression of countenance during all this time?"

"One of utter amazement and incredulity, I should say. Even when he left us, while we closed and locked the door in the screen, in order to take a thorough inventory of the contents of the safe, he remarked:

"'You have simply mislaid the bag, Compton. You will find it, all right. I won't wait here, but I'll return in half an hour. In the meantime, do not let any knowledge of this affair get beyond your own department.'"

"You began the inventory at once, did you?"

"At once; yes."

"Tell me how that inventory was taken."

"Why, in the usual way, of course."

"Tell me how it was taken. Who took the things from the safe, and who checked them off, and all that."

"Graham took the articles from the safe, calling each one off as he did so. Then he passed them to me, and I called them off a second time. Dean took down each article as it was mentioned by Graham, and Shaw performed the same service for me. Thus, you see, we had a double inventory."

"You mean that Dean made a note of the articles as they were mentioned by Graham, paying no attention to what you said; and that Shaw noted all that you stated, without regard to Graham; is that the idea?"

"It is."

"Every article was removed from the safe, I suppose?"

"Yes; until it was as bare as when it came from the factory."

"Now, afterward, were those two inventories compared?"

"They were."

"Was there a mistake in either of them?"

"Dean made two errors. That is, they were not exactly errors, either. He merely made two duplicate entries. That is, twice he noted down what I called as well as what Graham called. His nervousness under the circumstances would account for that, however."

"Certainly. What followed the inventory?"

"The property was returned to the safe."

"And then——"

"I went with Krebs to the president's office, where the matter was discussed. I don't suppose it is necessary to go into that. I could not tell you any more than you already know."

"No; it is not necessary. What can you tell me regarding the conduct of your subordinates during the remainder of the day?"

"Nothing, I think. We were all benumbed by the event."

"What was the attitude of Graham during the remainder of the day?"

"One of extreme sympathy with me and for me. He was all kindness."

"And of Shaw?"

"The same."

"And of Dean?"

"Well, Dean was different—he is different from the others, you know. He was fidgety and uneasy. I think he visited the washroom a dozen times that morning, and as many in the afternoon."

"Who was the first to take his hat and leave the store that evening?"

"Dean was."

"Mr. Compton, do you know now what subconscious knowledge means?"

"I don't think I understand you, Mr. Carter."

"Don't you know now who stole those diamonds?"

"Who—stole—the—diamonds? I don't under——"

"Compton, the name of the thief is Daniel Dean, just as surely as you sit in that chair. It is perfectly plain to me. It only remains now to prove it, and that will possibly be no easy task. But I will prove it. You have my word for that."

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER'S DISCOVERY.

Compton remained like one who is dazed by a blow long after Nick Carter made the startling announcement he did; but he saw such settled conviction on the face of the detective that at least he could not doubt his sincerity, and at last he murmured:

"Won't you tell me upon what grounds you base your assertion, Mr. Carter?"

"I am not quite prepared to do so yet. Presently I will be. But before I do that, there are two other important points I wish to discuss with you."

"Very well. What are they?"

"First, the position of your department in the establishment, relative to the other departments that are near you on the same floor."

"Do you mean what are the departments that adjoin mine on either side?"

"Yes; that will do to begin with."

"The gold ingot department adjoins mine on the west, and the silver bullion on the east."

"Those are relatively unimportant, as compared with yours, are they not?"

"Possibly."

"Can you sit in your department and see all down the line in either direction, for the full length of the store, through the other departments?"

"At night, yes; during the day, no."

"Why not during the day?"

"Because there are curtains between each of the departments; curtains fixed to the wire screen, you know. At night these are drawn, so that the watchman has a full view throughout the floor."

"Who draws those curtains aside when the business of the day is done?"

"Sometimes one and sometimes another. Sometimes they are forgotten, but the watchman always goes around immediately after half-past five and attends to them in case any of them have been forgotten."

"So that, as a matter of fact, while you are seated in your department you can be seen only from the passageway between the screens?"

"Yes."

"The workers in the ingot and the bullion departments cannot see you, or you them?"

"That is correct."

"How high are those curtains? Are they as high, for instance, as the top of the safe from which the diamonds disappeared?"

"Just about, I think."

"Mr. Compton, if that safe were here in this room and the doors were open, how long would it take you to change the set of the time lock?"

"About thirty seconds, I should say. It is done almost as readily as one would change the hands of a clock."

"If you wished to fix that lock so that it would open again in fifteen minutes, could you do so?"

"Certainly."

"Now, the other important point I wished to ask you about concerns the woman who was being shown through the establishment. You remember mentioning her?"

"Certainly; but I can't tell you anything about her."

"Don't you remember what she looked like? Was she young or old?"

"Between twenty and thirty, I should say."

"Dark, or light?"

"A blonde."

"Beautiful or ugly?"

"Rather attractive, I thought."

"You say she stood there for some time?"

"Why, yes; quite a time. I supposed, if I thought about it at all, that the guide was explaining to her about the immense value in precious stones we carry overnight in the safe."

"What made you think that?"

"Well, for one thing, it is the story that is usually told while visitors are near my department; besides——"

"Well?"

"I noticed that she seemed much interested in the appearance of the safe."

"Exactly. Did she also look at you?"

"Why, yes, several times—but not, my dear sir, in a flirtatious manner."

Nick laughed.

"I expect that she had something much more important on her mind at that time, Compton. Did you notice that she looked at your assistants, also? At Dean, for example?"

"I did see that she noticed Graham particularly; but he is a handsome fellow, you know, and it was not surprising. She seemed to devote a little attention to Shaw, also; but, really, I did not see her look at Dean once."

The detective smiled.

"Did Dean look at her?" he asked.

"If he did, I do not know it."

"How about Graham and Shaw?"

"Oh, they can't either of them keep their eyes off a pretty woman."

"You had never seen her before, you say?"

"Never to my knowledge."

"Or since?"

"No, sir."

"What is the name of the guide who was conducting her?"

"Reilly."

"Well, we will leave the woman for the present. What is the name of the man who stands at the employees' door from five o'clock and checks you 'in' and 'out'?"

"Samson. He is outside watchman for the establishment from 6 till 12 P. M."

"Then he is on duty right now, isn't he?"

"He should be, yes."

"I want you to give me a note to him, requesting that he will reply to a few questions I wish to ask him. But first, do you happen to know where the man Reilly lives?"

"I do, for I secured his place for him. He is a very worthy man. He lives just around the corner from here, on Fourth Avenue."

"Good! Give me also a note to him, making the same request, and I will not trespass any longer on your time to-night."

"But won't you tell me first upon what grounds you base your assumption of the guilt of Daniel Dean?"

"Not to-night, Mr. Compton. I haven't time now. But you will soon know. If you will prepare those two notes for me I will go now."

Fifteen minutes later the detective was in the street, hurrying toward the house where the guide, Reilly, lived, and fortunately he found him at home.

"Reilly," said the detective, after the man had read the note carefully two or three times, "do you remember hearing about the loss of those diamonds, at Orloff's?"

"I do, sir. Everybody is talking about it now."

"Do you know the night they disappeared?"

"I do, sir. I asked Mr. Compton about it and he told me."

"Do you remember taking a lady through the building almost at closing time, that very night?"

"I do, sir, because it was so late when she applied that I at first refused to take her; but she said she only wanted to see the places where they kept such immense amounts in gold and silver and diamonds, that I finally consented to take her through that floor; besides, sir, she gave me a very liberal fee."

"Of course. Now, do you know anything at all about her?"

"I know her name, sir. I found it out to-day."

"Indeed! How was that?"

"I was standing in front of the Hotel Culberson, in Seventeenth Street, talking with the janitor, who is a friend of mine, when she came out of the hotel and went toward Broadway. I recognized her and I asked my friend who she was, and he said she was Mrs. Lee, and that she had an apartment in the house."

"Reilly, you're a brick! And here is a five spot to help you to forget this conversation. What is the name of your friend the janitor at the Culberson?"

"Sullivan, sir."

"Thank you; good-night."

The detective hurried to the avenue, leaped on a car, and was presently in Seventeenth Street, in front of the Hotel Culberson, where he rang for the hall boy and asked to see the janitor, for the Hotel Culberson was, after all, only a second-rate apartment house.

After a short wait, Sullivan appeared from the regions below.

"Well, sir?" he inquired, in the noncommittal tone of janitors in general.

"Your friend Reilly sent me to you," said Nick, "and in order that we may get along together, here is a two-dollar bill in advance. I want you to tell me what you know about a Mrs. Lee who occupies one of your apartments."

"I don't know anything about her except that she is Mrs. Lee and that she lives in the house."

"How long has she lived here?"

"Six months."

"Does she live alone? Has she a husband, by any chance?"

"Certainly she has, else she couldn't live here. He's a traveling man and is away almost all the time, but her brother comes to see her two or three times a week. Mr. Lee and him is great cronies, too."

"Indeed! Do you know her brother's name?"

"Yes; it's Dean; and I've heard her call him Dan, so I suppose that's his first name."

"Thank you. Now, if I give you another two-dollar bill will you forget that any inquiries have been made about her?"

"Betcher life I will! You ain't asked nothin' out of the way, anyhow."

"Certainly not; but I don't wish her to know that any questions have been asked at all."

"She won't know it from me."

"Thank you. Good-night."

Nick turned away toward Broadway and was soon walking rapidly toward the establishment of Orloff & Co.

"It strikes me," he mused, as he hurried along, "that things have rather come my way to-night. I wonder if that woman is really Dean's sister. Anyhow, it is a thousand to one that she knows all about that diamond robbery. The thing is, to prove it all. I could tell the whole story, just as it happened from beginning to end,

at this very moment, and I haven't got a scintilla of evidence about it anywhere. But I'll find it. I will find it. And now to have a little talk with Samson, the doorman and watchman."

Nick discovered his man on the corner at Orloff's, for it will be remembered that he was outside watchman from six till twelve.

"Is your name Samson?" asked the detective.

"It is, if it will do you any good to know that," was the reply.

"Here is a short letter for you." And Nick gave him the note written by Compton.

"All right, Mr. Carter," said the watchman, after he had read the letter. "I'll give you any information I can."

"I merely wish you to tell me as nearly as possible which nights during the last ten days Mr. Daniel Dean has left the building after the fixed time of half-past five."

The watchman stirred uneasily, hesitated, and then in an apologetic tone he said:

"I don't understand how you know about it, sir, and I suppose it will get me into trouble for not reporting it, but each time he has only been a minute or two late, and he said he was sorry and that he did not know it was past the time and——"

"Never mind all that, Samson. I don't think you will get into trouble about it. In fact I will assure you that you will not, provided you will tell me the whole truth about it."

"I'll do that, sir."

"Well, go ahead, then, and answer my question."

"He has only been after the hour twice, sir, in all the time I have known him. The first time was a week ago to-night, or last night, I forget which, when he was about five minutes late in leaving, and the other time was to-night, when it was three minutes."

"To-night?" said Nick.

"Yes, sir."

The detective uttered a low whistle; then he said:

"What did he say to you the other time when he was late? A week ago, I mean? What excuse did he give?"

"He said that he stopped to write a letter, thinking that he had time, and that he was mighty sorry, and that it should not occur again if I would not report him; and he did seem mighty flurried, too, so I let him off, and told him I would say nothing about it. He was all thanks, I can tell you. He's a nice sort of a young fellow. Always has a cigar for a fellow and a merry word. I like him."

"What about to-night? What was the excuse to-night?"

"He just laughed and said he didn't know it was after time—and it wasn't, so very much, you know."

"Thank you, Samson. That's all I will ask you to-night. And now I wish you to make me a promise."

"What about, sir."

"That you will not mention to anybody—and least of all that you will not mention it to Mr. Dean—the fact that we have said a word about this matter."

"I will promise you that, sir."

"Very well. Good-night."

When the detective turned away, he walked very slowly, with bent head, thinking; but after a little he hastened his steps and took his way directly toward his own home.

"Now to find out what my lads have got to report to me," he said to himself; "and particularly what Chick will have to say about young Dean. By Jove! but that chap is a slick article. He certainly is! And the first affair worked so well and has remained such a mystery that he has dared to try it again. On my word, I think I will go and wake up Mr. Peyton Storms before I go home. I would like to surprise him."

Suiting the action to the idea, the detective hailed a cab and had himself driven rapidly to the residence of the president of Orloff & Co.

Fortunately that gentleman had not retired, and as Nick sent in his card as "Felix Parsons" he was at once admitted.

"What is it, Carter?" asked Mr. Storms, anxiously. "Have you discovered anything?"

"Yes," replied the detective. "I have discovered something of importance, I think."

"What is it, please?"

"I have discovered that when you go to your place of business in the morning you will find that a second mysterious robbery has been committed; that more diamonds have been taken from the same safe!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE INSPECTOR'S NARROW ESCAPE.

The expression of mingled amazement and incredulity on the face of Peyton Storms when the detective made his startling announcement, was ludicrous. Beyond the

utterance of a sudden and sharp exclamation which is scarcely printable, he said nothing, however, and Nick continued in the same even tone he had used before:

"It is, of course, possible that I am mistaken in this surmise, for, after all, it is only a surmise on my part; but it is an opinion which arises from logical deductions, and because precisely the same conditions existed at your establishment when you closed for the day, that obtained at the time of the taking of the pear-shaped diamonds."

"One might suppose," ventured Storms, tentatively, "that you already know the name of the thief."

"I do," replied the detective, calmly.

Storms leaped from his chair.

"You do?" he cried. "Tell me who it is. Who is he?"

"Not so fast, Mr. Storms. I am not prepared to tell you the name of the thief just yet, for the very good reason that I have no definite proof of his guilt in my possession."

"At least assure me that it is not Edward Compton."

"I will do that with all my heart, sir. It is not Edward Compton. In fact, it is through the aid of Mr. Compton that I have been able to trace out the affair at all. I have spent the greater part of this evening with him, and since I left him I have been following out the ideas that were suggested to me through my conversation with him."

"And you have succeeded? You are perfectly satisfied in your own mind that you are correct in your conclusions, are you?"

"Perfectly."

"Do you anticipate much difficulty in securing the proofs which you say are not yet in your possession?"

"No; for a brief interval I did fear that it would be extremely difficult, but now I believe that I see my way quite clearly."

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"And now, Mr. Storms, to return to the statement I made when I entered the room."

"Yes?"

"I wish you would do me the favor to be at your desk in the morning before Mr. Compton arrives. He tells me that he is in the habit of getting there about a quarter to eight."

"Yes."

"I wish you would tell him what I have just told you —that is, about my suspicion that a second theft will be discovered when he opens the safe."

"I will do that."

"Of course I have no idea what has been stolen. That can only be ascertained by an examination of the safe and its contents; but whatever has disappeared, I wish to have the fact kept entirely secret throughout the day to-morrow. Will you see that it is done?"

"I will certainly make the effort. Do you mean that it must be kept from his assistants as well as others?"

"Certainly."

"It shall be done if it is possible to do it."

Nick was silent for a moment, and then he said:

"If I will tell you the name of the thief will you promise not to permit the knowledge to influence you until the time is ripe to make the disclosure?"

"I will."

"Then I think I need not hesitate. The guilty man is unquestionably Daniel Dean."

"Dean?"

"Yes."

"But how——"

"We need not go into the details just now, I think. If you will tell Compton in the morning to find some excuse to send Dean out on an errand or something while the safe is opened, the matter of the theft can be kept secret. And now, with that understanding, I will say 'Good-night.' You may expect me at the establishment sometime during the day to-morrow; and I think, when I arrive, I will be ready to arrest the guilty parties."

The detective hastened home after that, and found his three assistants awaiting him, although Chick announced that he had only just come in, because the man he had shadowed—Dean—had kept him on the tilt all the evening and half the night.

Patsy, who had followed Graham, and Ten-Ichi, who had shadowed Shaw, had both returned early, their subjects having retired to their homes at once and remained there.

"You have all done well," said Nick, "but since I sent you out the case has narrowed so perceptably that I have no need of any report but Chick's. Dean is the only one I am interested in."

Then he turned quickly to Chick, and added:

"Didn't Dean take you to the Hotel Culberson, on Seventeenth Street?"

"Yes," replied Chick, "and he kept me there a good while, too. He went to the apartment of a Mrs.——"

"Lee?" asked Nick.

"Say," said Chick, "if you know all about it, what is the use of my telling you?"

"I am guessing and you know; that is all."

"Well, he went to see a Mrs. Lee, who happens to be a half-sister of his. After a while they came out together and went to Roversi's to dine. They sat a long while over their dinner, and appeared to be very deeply interested in the subject of their conversation. After that he took her home, and then he went home himself, and that is all I have to report."

"It is quite enough. Tell me, did you happen to see a package pass between them?"

"No. I have told you all I know."

The detective left his chair and got upon his feet.

"Let's go to bed, Chick," he said. "I thought I had planned the thing all out for to-morrow, but I have determined in the last five minutes to alter my plans entirely. I think that the only way to carry this thing out the way I want it done, is to take the bull by the horns. I shall work the 'third degree' on Mrs. Lee and on Dean in the morning. Have we any blank warrants in the house, Chick?"

"Yes; several."

"Very good. I shall fake two warrants in the morning. I know it is not exactly regular, but it seems necessary in this case. The only way in which the case can be proved against the guilty parties is to wring a confession from one or both of them, and you must help me to do that."

"Shall I get the warrants now?" asked Chick.

"No. It will be time enough in the morning. Meet me in the breakfast room at six."

They separated then; but promptly at six in the morning they entered the breakfast room, and, after a hasty meal, repaired to the study, where the detective quickly filled out the fake warrants which he had determined to serve.

One of them was for Mrs. Lee, and the other was for Dean, and armed with these the two detectives left the house.

"Now," said Nick, as they hurried toward the car, "this is the plan of procedure: You are to go directly to Dean's home. You are to wait outside until he leaves the house, and then you are to shadow him until he is as near to the home of Mrs. Lee as his trip to Orloff's store will take him. At about the right spot—and you must use your own judgment regarding that point—you will arrest him quietly, telling him that you have a warrant for his arrest for the taking of the pear-shaped diamonds. If he wishes to see the warrant, let him. It may be that he will break down and confess at once. but I do not expect that."

"What shall I do with him when I have arrested him?"

"I am coming to that. Take him to the Culberson; to Mrs. Lee's. Tell him that if he goes along quietly with you and offers no resistance, nobody need know that he is under arrest. It is rather early in the morning for me to call upon Mrs. Lee, but all the same you will find me there awaiting you."

"And then——"

"I am going now to headquarters. I will get the inspector to go with me to Mrs. Lee's. I have already sent him a wire asking him to meet me at his office. By taking him with me the arrest will eventually be made in the regular way, notwithstanding the irregular warrants we have improvised, and the confessions I expect to hear will be official."

The detective swung off the car a few moments later and took his way to police headquarters, where, in response to his wire, he found Inspector O'Brien awaiting him.

"What's up, Nick?" he asked. "You made me take an early breakfast this morning."

"I wished you to have the honor of arresting the man, in person, who stole the pear-shaped diamonds," replied Nick, calmly.

"What!"

Nick laughed, and then related the story from beginning to end, as he knew it, withholding nothing from the head of the detective bureau.

"We will want another witness," said the inspector, when the story was told. "I'll take Serg. Petty along with us;" and so, presently, the three started out, timing themselves so that they would arrive at the hotel Culberson only a few moments before Chick would be due there with Dean.

"If Mrs. Lee happens to be an early riser," said Nick, as they ascended the steps leading to the house, "we will have no difficulty in gaining admittance to her apartment. If, on the other hand, she is not yet dressed, we will have to make some excuse for our call. Come ahead. I want to be prepared for Chick and Dean when they arrive."

The elevator boy evinced some surprise when told to

take the three men to the apartment of Mrs. Lee, but he did not evince it in words until they were nearly to the top of the shaft, when he said, somewhat irrelevantly:

"I suppose you've come to bid Mrs. Lee good-by. I telephoned for a carriage for her, ten minutes ago, and she gave me a five-dollar tip. What do you think of that?"

"I think you have earned another dollar by telling me," replied Nick, giving one to the boy; and he winked at O'Brien, and added:

"I think we will find her up and dressed, all right."

And they did.

The door of her apartment was open, and already two of her trunks were in the hall of the building waiting to be removed.

As the detective halted in the doorway, he could see that all was confusion inside the apartment—that sort of confusion which is incident upon hasty removal; and through the private hallway of the apartment he could see Mrs. Lee herself, giving directions to her maid, and to a man who was assisting them. He recognized her at once from the description he had received from Compton.

Followed by his companions he passed through the open door, and had actually entered the room where Mrs. Lee was giving orders before she discovered that she had been intruded upon.

She looked up then in surprise and anger.

"Who are you and what do you want here?" she demanded.

It was O'Brien who answered her. He stepped forward, and in his softest and sweetest tones, replied:

"Madam, we are here to place you under arrest. It is painfully unpleasant, I know, but it is, nevertheless, my duty. I am Inspector O'Brien, from police headquarters."

The woman did not evince the slightest surprise. Indeed, if she felt any emotion at all, she did not manifest it.

She merely shrugged her shoulders and raised her brows somewhat quizzically as she inquired:

"Place me under arrest? For what, pray?"

"For the taking of the pear-shaped diamonds, madam."

She smiled then and shrugged her shoulders again.

"How excessively interesting," she said, smiling and taking a step nearer to the window, and therefore a little further away from the inspector.

They stood then about ten feet apart; she was near the window, and O'Brien was facing her near the middle of the room. Nick had passed around the center table, so that he flanked the woman on her left about equidistant from her with O'Brien, while Petty remained at the doorway.

And then a most unexpected thing happened.

Mrs. Lee suddenly laughed aloud; at the same moment she raised her right hand from where it had been half concealed in the folds of her dress.

That hand held a revolver, which she pointed directly at the inspector's heart and fired.

But for Nick Carter, the superb record of Inspector O'Brien would have closed there; as it was, the bullet tore through the shoulder of his coat, grazing the flesh.

The very quietude of the woman had placed Nick Carter on his guard, and he had purposely edged nearer to her, so that when she did raise her arm to fire, he was prepared to leap forward, and, by reaching out suddenly, he succeeded in striking up her arm, so that the course of the bullet was deflected.

But it was a tragic instant, nevertheless, fraught with great possibilities.

Before she could fire again, Nick had wrenched the weapon from her grasp, and had forced the woman backward into a chair, where she remained with entire composure, apparently as unruffled by what she had done as she had appeared to be when O'Brien first made the announcement of her arrest.

And at that crucial moment, Chick, accompanied by Daniel Dean, entered the room.

They had heard the report of the revolver from the hallway, and Dean had darted forward to interfere; but he had not taken two steps before Chick had seized him and drawn him back again.

Nevertheless, as they entered the room, Dean broke away from the assistant again, and in an instant more a revolver flashed in his grasp.

This time it was O'Brien who acted, for before the weapon could be discharged, he struck it from Dean's hand, and it fell to the floor at the opposite side of the room.

"It seems," said the inspector, with a shrug, "that instead of having to do with common thieves, we are up against a set of desperate criminals; eh, Nick?"

Nick Carter turned to Dean, whom Chick had forced backward into a chair.

"Dean," he said, coldly, "will you and Mrs. Lee tell us where the proceeds of your two robberies are concealed, or shall we search for them?"

"I don't know what you mean?" replied Dean, doggedly.

"Don't you? Where are the pear-shaped diamonds? Where are the jewels that you stole from the safe last night?"

Dean made no reply.

"I know the whole story, Dean," continued the detective. "You can make it a little easier for yourself and for your half-sister here, by telling the whole truth at once, for if you compel me to do it for you, it will go all the harder with you and with her."

"All the same," said Dean, "if you know it so well, you had better tell it yourself."

CHAPTER X.

HOW THE THING WAS DONE.

"Do you suppose," asked the detective, "that there is a thing happens in the establishment of Orloff & Co. which the firm does not know?"

Dean made no reply.

"Would you like me to tell you exactly how the robbery of the pear-shaped diamonds was accomplished?" insisted the detective.

"Why, yes; like others connected with the house, I have been intensely interested concerning the mystery," was the cool response.

"And are you equally interested in the second robbery?"

"I did not know that there had been a second robbery."

"No? Don't you know that you were seen each time you approached the safe where the diamonds are kept?"

"If that is the case," retorted Dean, "how does it happen that you have waited until now to make an arrest?"

"The firm doubtless has good reasons for its acts. In any case, I am not one of the firm, so I cannot answer that question. Do you remember that it fell to you to set the time lock the night of the theft of the pear-shaped diamonds?"

"Oh, yes; I remember that all right."

"Do you remember the hour and the minute at which you set the lock to open?"

Dean did not reply.

"Don't you remember," continued the detective, "that instead of setting it to open at the time agreed upon in the morning, you arranged it to open at five-twenty-five that same afternoon?"

Dean paled perceptibly, but, as before, he made no reply.

"Do you remember," continued the detective, "that you were the last one to go to the washroom that afternoon? That, therefore, you were the last one to leave your department?"

Still silence.

"The curtains had not been drawn back. It was your duty to do that service that night, but, before you did it, you waited near the safe until you heard the click which told you that the time lock had done its work and that the way into the safe was open to you.

"It was only the work of a moment, then, for you to throw open the outside doors and to manipulate the simple combination lock, which you knew perfectly well, of the inside doors.

"To reach out and seize the chamois bag which contained the diamonds your sister coveted, and to drop it into your pocket, was then the work of an instant.

"To close and lock the inside doors required scarcely a longer time, and to reset the time lock for the appointed time in the morning required just forty seconds—you see you were timed in all that you did, don't you?"

"Damn you!" was the only reply which Dean vouchsafed.

"Damn and be welcome, if that eases your mind at all," responded Nick. "What I wish you to realize is that there has not been a moment since that time when you have not been under the surveillance of an all-seeing eye which has pursued you relentlessly."

Dean bit his lips, but said nothing.

"You hurried with all the speed you could," continued the detective, relentlessly, "but notwithstanding that, you could not get outside the building on time. You were five minutes late in reporting at the door, and, notwithstanding the fact that Samson was kind to you, and kept his word with you, too, to say nothing about your tardiness, you see that the fact is known.

"Why did you stand with your back toward the room while you looked out at the window when poor old Compton, whom you knew might be accused of the theft, was opening the safe to take out the diamonds for Mr. Krebs? Did you suppose that the eye that saw you when you stole the diamonds was not watching you narrowly then?

"Do you suppose that even if your guilt were not

known, it would not have been suspected from your conduct after that? Do you remember what that conduct was? Answer me?"

"My conduct was as good as the others'," replied Dean, doggedly.

"Oh, no, it was not, for yours was the conduct of a guilty man, while the others in that room were perfectly natural. Innocence rarely needs a defender. Guilt can never have one that is adequate to the task.

"Do you remember that you sat at your desk, with staring eyes all the while fixed upon Compton, except at rare intervals, when they wandered toward the safe, or rested for an instant upon the face of Mr. Krebs?

"Do you remember that, when the inventory was being taken, you trembled in every nerve of your body, so that any eye that was watching you could read your guilt as plainly as if it had been stamped in red letters across your forehead?

"Did you suppose that your actions were not observed? Did you think that you were not watched? Did you, poor fool, suppose that you could escape?

"And go back for a moment to the afternoon when you took the stones. Did you suppose that there were not people there who knew that Mrs. Lee was your half-sister, and did either or both of you suppose that she could go there to that place, and stand there within easy speaking distance of you, without once recognizing you, and do all that without casting suspicion upon both of you?"

The detective had struck the keynote at last.

He had succeeded in hitting upon a weak spot in the armor of the man he was attacking.

Like a flash, Dean turned toward his sister, who was seated at the opposite side of the room.

"I told you you would ruin the whole shooting match if you came there, Net!" he blurted out.

Nick and O'Brien smiled, and Nick continued, in the same tone:

"Oh, no, Dean, she didn't ruin it; you ruined it. Haven't I already told you that not a move you made escaped the attention of that eye that was watching you; and the owner of that eye knew that some day you would steal. He knew it, Dean, and that is why you were watched.

"There was never once a chance for you to steal and to escape the consequences of your act; you never had a chance.

"And then, last night again! What in the world convinced you that you could repeat your crime and get away? Tell me that!"

"She did!" cried Dean, pointing across the room toward his sister.

"Fool!" she retorted. "You are weakening, aren't you?"

"Well, suppose I am? It is you who brought me to it!"

The woman curled her lip in scorn, and made no reply.

But just here O'Brien stepped quickly in front of her, and, towering over her, demanded:

"Where are those diamonds? Where have you concealed them?"

"Since you know so much about them," she retorted, "find them, if you can!" and she smiled up at him as innocently as a child might have done.

"Take the woman out of the room, inspector," said Nick. "Let me talk with Dean alone for a few moments." And then, as soon as they were alone, he added, addressing Dean:

"Do you realize, my lad, that it is all up with you?"

He spoke kindly and sympathetically; and, indeed, he did feel kindness and sympathy for this young man, who had gone so sadly astray; and, when Dean made no reply, he continued:

"You are still a young man. There may still be a chance for you. Mr. Storms is not a hard man, nor is he an unfeeling man. If everything that you have taken from the establishment of your employers is returned to them intact, I feel quite certain that you will be dealt with as leniently as possible.

"Think a moment, my lad. Turn the whole affair over in your mind, and then do what your own conscience tells you to do."

"I am—very sorry—that it happened," murmured Dean.

"And I am very sorry that it has happened," said the detective. "Suppose you and your sister had gotten away from the country to-day, with the diamonds in your possession—what good could it have possibly done? Even if you had not been suspected before, suspicion most certainly would have fallen upon you then. Don't you see that?"

"Yes, I see it now; I see it all now."

"If I will promise to intercede for you with Mr. Storms with all the power and influence at my command, will you make a full confession of it all, Dean?"

"Yes; I will confess the whole thing, from beginning to end. But you know it all now, so of what use is it to confess?"

"It will be of use to you. You will have the consciousness of having done the right and the square thing at last. Don't you see that?"

"Yes."

"Where are the diamonds, Dean? All of them."

"My sister has them."

"All of them?"

"Yes."

"And are they intact?"

"Yes. They have not been touched, save when we have looked at them, since I took them from the safe."

"Does that include what you took last night?"

"Yes; everything."

"You say your sister has them?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where they are?"

"They are all inside the chamois bag which originally contained only the big stones."

"And where is the bag?"

"I don't know exactly, only——"

"Well?"

"She said she would conceal the chamois bag inside her corset; I suppose she has done so."

"Without a doubt. They will be found by the matron when we arrive at police headquarters. Now, tell me, Dean, weren't you persuaded into this thing by her?"

"Is it fair for me to make such a statement as that, sir?" asked Dean. "Do you think it will lessen my own guilt, or serve to ease my conscience, if I endeavor to place the blame for my wrongdoing upon another? Upon her?"

"No, I do not. There is only one thing more; you are positive, are you, that she has all the diamonds in her possession?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"You were going away together to-day, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Where, and how?"

"The *Etruria* sails at one o'clock to-day. She has taken passage for both of us. I was to go to the store as usual this morning, but I was to join her as soon after twelve o'clock as I could."

"And did you for a moment think that you could escape?"

"No, sir; to tell you the truth, I did not. I have felt all along that a hand was ready to fall upon my shoulder and arrest me. I have felt all along that I could not escape. I have almost known that my career would be short, and, if you could know the agony I have endured since I took those pear-shaped diamonds from the safe, you would feel sorry for me."

"I do feel sorry for you, Dean, and I shall try to make Mr. Storms sorry for you, too."

"Thank you, sir."

"Tell me one thing: If your sister had not been present, near your department in the store, the night you took the diamonds, you would not have taken them, would you?"

"No, I would not. I had made up my mind not to do so, until she appeared; and then I decided to carry out the arrangement as we had planned it. And now, sir, will you tell me one thing I wish to know?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"You spoke about my being watched; about some one who saw me throughout the whole affair. I had no idea that I was observed. Will you tell me who it was that watched me?"

"My lad, it was the eye of God that saw you; no other," replied Nick, slowly.

* * * * * * *

The diamonds were found in the possession of Mrs. Lee, and were duly returned to the custody of Orloff & Co.

Greatly to the surprise of Nick Carter, when he approached Mr. Storms on the subject of extending leniency to young Dean, the president of the company replied:

"Mr. Carter, I intend to keep that young man in my employ. I think we can save him now. He has had his lesson, and I think forgiveness will do him more good now than punishment. As for his sister, Mrs. Lee, there can be no charge laid against her, other than that of receiving stolen goods. I should like to send her to prison, because I think she is really responsible for the whole thing; but—the fact of the matter is, that the firm wants the whole matter hushed up, and, inasmuch as we have recovered our property intact, we shall make no charge against either of them, on the condition that Mrs. Lee agrees to leave the country, and not return to it. I shall keep Dean here, and Compton will look after him."

THE END.

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